An Early Start to Self-Regulation Newsletter: Issue 6

In the previous newsletters we wrote about the importance of goal setting and motivation for children's self-regulation, and how parents, caregivers and educators can support these in the home environment. In this final newsletter we focus on the importance of problem solving skills, measured risk-taking (e.g., being willing to try something even though there is a chance you may not succeed) and persistence.

How can we encourage children's problem solving, risk-taking and persistence?

As children develop they encounter many challenges: attending a new school; taking up a new sport; making new friends; and overcoming disappointment. While it is not expected that young children will be able to overcome all of these challenges alone, it is important to support children to develop the skills that are essential to success. Important ways that you can foster your child's ability to face new challenges include: promoting effective problem solving skills; providing opportunities for your child to engage in measured risk-taking; and encouraging your child to persist even if they do not experience immediate success.

Situations that present children with an opportunity to engage in appropriate risk-taking (i.e., they need to attempt something new where there is no guarantee of success, and there is no risk of harm) are ideal for encouraging children's ability to problem solve. These situations require children to 'put themselves out there' as they make predictions, test ideas and reflect on previous attempts. Opportunities for children to engage with tasks where they may not necessarily experience success straight away can include: learning to ride a bike; attempting a difficult game or puzzle; manoeuvring through a physically challenging obstacle course; or attempting to write their name.

While these experiences should provide a level of challenge, they should still be **appropriate** to your child's **age and ability**. This will increase the likelihood of them experiencing success at some point. Children who experience constant failure are much less likely to engage deeply with tasks or persist in novel or challenging situations. The goal is to provide children with experiences of success that come from effort and persistence.

Where children do not yet have the problem solving skills or persistence required to engage with certain tasks, there are several ways that you can support them:

1. **Utilise open-ended questions to engage children in making observations:** The first significant step in problem solving is being able to accurately identify the issue. The ability to observe accurately is an essential part of children's development. Young children pay attention with all their senses. The ability to 'read' our environment is important for children identifying and understanding the problems that are preventing them from achieving their goals (e.g., not being able to fit the contents of a box back into that box). Open-ended questions supporting children to identify the problem can help them to begin identifying potential solutions (e.g., 'How were these objects organised when you took them out of the box? Why do you think they might not be fitting in the box now when they were before?)
2. **Support children to experiment as they engage in the process of trial and error:** Children experiment for two reasons: (1) out of curiosity, in order to see how something works; and (2) to solve problems they encounter in play. The process of experimentation ('trial and error') can help children attempt, evaluate and refine their solutions to problems that arise. This systematic approach teaches children it is ok to be wrong, and in this way encourages persistence in instances where they make mistakes or are faced with challenge. Experimentation can also provide you with an opportunity to reinforce that it is OK to make mistakes; this is how we learn! Where children have poorer self-regulation skills, they will often be resistant to engaging with tasks they perceive as difficult. Providing verbal reassurance can encourage continued engagement when your child is initially unsuccessful. You can also model making your own mistakes for your child to see (e.g., putting something away in the incorrect spot, putting clothes on inside out) and allowing them to help you resolve these, or providing a running commentary of your own problem solving thought processes.

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3. **Encourage children to make predictions:** Through making predictions, children are encouraged to think in new ways, which is an important component of problem solving. You can help children make connections across experiences by drawing on prior knowledge and asking them to consider what will happen. For instance, when reading a story you might ask questions about why a character acted in a particular way, and what the child thinks might happen next. You might also brainstorm some alternative endings to stories that could have turned out differently. Where problems arise, encourage your child to think about what they already know and then review what has been learnt once a solution has been found.
4. **Assist children to record and evaluate the outcome of their attempts:** This is an important final stage in the problem solving process. It gives children the chance to revisit their ideas, to reflect on what they have discovered and to evaluate their conclusions. Revisiting ideas and discoveries helps to build children's awareness of their own thinking and reasoning process. Encourage your child to explain their ideas through the use of reflective and open-ended questions: 'Can you remember what you were thinking when...?'
5. **Where possible, encourage children to collaborate in the problem solving process:** By working together with siblings or peers to overcome challenges, children are encouraged to cooperate, negotiate and engage in effective communication with others. One example is working together to build a cubby house out of cardboard boxes.

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